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Land of Little Water

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Mexican natives wash their clothes in a fast flowing stream, so. . . .



. . . the author tried it.

Mexico . . .

Land of Little Water

by Nancy Voss

Technical Journalism Sophomore

GETTING enough pure water is one of the unique problems of the Mexican homemaker. That's the situation which Eleanor Breckenridge, H. Ec. Sr., and I found this summer when we went to Mexico on a YMCA-sponsored study tour.

While in Mexico City, we lived with a Mexican family who was extremely kind and hospitable to us. Communication of ideas between us was very difficult since neither Eleanor nor I spoke Spanish, except a rather feeble "muchos gracias," and the family with which we lived spoke no English other than a few words which the daughter had learned in school. Often our attempts at talking to one another were amusing and sometimes embarrassing. Such was the case when we asked for water to wash our hair the first night we arrived in Mexico City.

We had been traveling in a dusty bus for over a week. When the *senorita* asked us if there were anything we would like, we managed, by pointing to our heads and then our shampoo, to make her understand we would like to wash our hair. She nodded her head and pointed to the bathtub which was half full of cold water. Then she said, "Buenos noches," and left us to our own resources.

Not realizing that there was a shortage of water in Mexico City, we washed our hair and then took baths, feeling rather abused that we had to use such cold water. When finished, we let all the water out of the tub thinking, of course, that it had been drawn for us in the first place.

Later, we were told that water was extremely scarce and in many sections of the city, including the section where we were staying, the water supply was turned off at 9 a.m. and not turned on again until midnight. Early each morning, the servant of the house would fill the bath tub with water—the family's water supply for that day. We soon discovered that many things which we had taken for granted in the United States were considered great luxuries in Mexico.

Mexico's problem is not so much that there is not enough water, but that the reservoir and plumbing systems of most of the cities are insufficient to store and carry enough water to supply the cities. Although rainfall is heavy from June to September, during the remainder of the year it is considerably less.

Almost anywhere we went in Mexico, finding drinking water was a major problem. Although the natives drink it freely, most water is badly polluted. Bottled water is sold for tourist use, and we learned to drink coffee or tea with almost all our meals since those beverages are made with boiled water.

While the shortage of pure water was somewhat of a novelty to us for the five weeks we were in Mexico, it is nothing new to the natives of that country. According to a speaker we heard while in Mexico City, nearly 50-60% of the Mexican babies die before they are three years old. A principle reason for this, he said, was that they drink water without purifying it. If a child lives to be three years old, he has usually built up enough resistance to the germs in the water so

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he is not seriously affected during the rest of his life. Too many babies are unable to build up that resistance and thousands of them die every year.

Modern washing machines are scarce in Mexico, but the native women have their own effective way of washing clothes. They take their washing to the nearest stream and scrub it on the rocks. Women of each village seem to have favorite rocks and almost any time of day, they can be seen rubbing their clothes clean.

While our group camped out at Camohmila, we decided to do our laundry "native fashion" so we went down to the stream to scrub our clothes. After washing them, we laid our clothes out on the grass to dry although Mexican women usually hang theirs on bushes or near-by trees.

Even though many parts of Mexico are still primitive and seem unaffected by modern inventions and life, one must not get the idea that all Mexico is that way. Mexico is a country of two extremes. In Mexico City there are slums in which the people are almost unbelievably poor. In the same city are ultra-modern sections.

As we traveled through Mexico, we talked of what we were going to buy first when we crossed the border. Some of us talked of good American hamburgers and ice cream or malts. Milk was a favorite with most of us and also fresh vegetables. But when we actually got back in the States, the first place everybody went was to a drinking fountain which had ice cold water that we didn't have to pour from a bottle!

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